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# Comparing States and Regions in East Asia and Europe: Is Southeast Asia ever part of East Asia ?

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***Themes and Perspectives***

*Southeast Asian Studies* has always had a strong commitment to publishing the best of empirically grounded, fieldwork-based or archival research in area studies. With this issue, we introduce a new section that presents articles by leading scholars in their respective fields. This section offers fresh, innovative, and wide-ranging perspectives on themes and issues of both immediate and long-term interest to Southeast Asia specialists.

**Comparing States and Regions in East Asia and Europe:  
Is Southeast Asia (ever) part of East Asia?\***

Roy Bin WONG\*\*

**Abstract**

This essay considers ways in which China and an “East Asia” which includes Southeast Asia can both be compared to Europe in ways that help us appreciate the limitations of conceptualizing political processes largely through practices pioneered in European history. Contrasts between political institutions in China and Europe historically and today in turn suggest the flexible ways in which “region” can mediate between the global and the local levels of analysis. Through historical and comparative arguments this essay simultaneously reframes the debates on area studies and on regionalism and regional integration in ways that open up new lines of inquiry and a new agenda for research under the rubric of “East Asia.” The essay argues that we need to attend to patterns of spatial similarities and connections, as well as differences, to better understand how regions were historically constructed and how these constructions shape the possibilities and limits of region-thinking and making.

**Keywords:** ASEAN, EU, Chinese history, historical comparison, regions

**The Importance and Difficulties of Considering Regions in a Global Age**

Globalization has changed not only the way we look at the present and future. It has also contributed to a re-evaluation of how we view the past. Terms like “global history” and “world history” have become common in American universities and are also increasingly found in Europe and Asia. Social scientists and humanists whose research topics a generation ago were framed within national contexts have moved beyond the borders of

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earlier work to examine connections that span great distances, be they looking at the movements of people, ideas, goods, or diseases. Teaching has also changed to embrace the human and natural networks of relations that produced elements of the past we share and promise to create a common future.

The rush to focus on global issues and highlight connections across vast distances has made the recognition of variations across space more difficult to achieve. Humanists and qualitative social scientists engage in few efforts at a comparative level. One common logic of contemporary social sciences and humanities that avoids seeking more systematic comparisons ties a particular case to its global influences and then claims the “global” must be seen in the “local” and the “local” to be created by its ties to the “global.” This makes it difficult for us to generalize from particular cases other than to say that everywhere is subject to global influences and each displays its local characteristics. We affirm a universalism driven by global factors at the same time as we allow for particular features that come out of local situations without considering ways to organize the variations we can find among a number of local cases. What spatial units exist between the local case and the world at large within which and between which we might look at similarities and differences?

Regions which are more than individual countries but far less than the entire globe provide an obvious, and I will suggest, a necessary spatial frame of evaluation. Yet, they are not fixed and formal units; they can be and indeed have been defined in multiple and competing ways. After World War II American academia and government conceptualized regions according to an “area studies” definition based on clusters of languages and countries distinguished by their geopolitical positions in an American-dominated world. Countries were key units within area studies; their histories were tied to shared cultural elements and in some cases to the notion of a common civilization. In the more recent past, the EU’s formation has given us a different standard according to which we can conceptualize regions. For historians there have been other regional studies of great importance, perhaps most famously Fernand Braudel’s study of the sixteenth-century Mediterranean, which began with the land bordering the sea and moved through the connections spanning the Mediterranean and carrying some of its merchants to Asia [Braudel 1972]. Making this physical space into a historical region was one of the major contributions of Braudel’s work and it subsequently inspired Asian specialists to consider the possible presence of similar maritime spaces. From the combination of Braudel’s seminal work and the work that has followed, we can see reasons why the concept of region is both useful and difficult to use.<sup>1)</sup>

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1) See Wong [2001] for a review of how Braudel’s work has influenced the study of ‘regions’ in Asian history.

### **Maritime Asia(s) and East Asia(s): Multiple Choices**

The multiple definitions of maritime Asia(s) developed by different authors may make us skeptical that any of them should be taken very seriously. It would be difficult, if not impossible, to get most scholars to agree on a single spatial unit of maritime Asia. But we may not want a single definition of a maritime Asian region most simply because there is no sea similarly bounded as the Mediterranean in Asia. In addition, a bit of reflection might suggest that the absence of any clearly defined maritime Asia alerts us to the changing dimensions of such a space over time that indicates the number, density and diversity of links, all of which can vary. If we want to examine how different kinds of connections form human networks of relations across particular physical spaces, we need not agree on the exact dimensions of such spaces. Presence in a particular region doesn't preclude membership in another; a periphery linked by certain ties to the core of a large region may also come under the influence of some other center either in different ways or in different historical periods. The multiple definitions of either "East Asia" or a "maritime Asia" "region" advertise the virtues of a flexible approach to identifying geographical spaces that exist between the local and the global. How then do we choose among different possible regional units we might wish to consider? In part, our choices must relate to the kinds of research or teaching purposes we have. Thinking consciously about the spatial dimensions of our research purposes and teaching goals can in fact help us to refine the subjects themselves. I will examine political transformations as an example of where a regional focus is helpful. First, however, let me acknowledge the academic reasons for making a political division between East Asia and Southeast Asia.

In the United States, Southeast Asian specialists often feel beleaguered if not belittled by the far larger academic presence of scholars working on China, Japan and Korea. Area studies more generally has been harshly criticized in the United States for being the product of a post-World War II political environment in which the world was divided into regions according to the priorities and concerns of government leaders.<sup>2)</sup> Southeast Asian Studies in the United States is thus doubly marginalized, seeking recognition as an area of research and teaching both within area studies and in the humanities and social science disciplines that have been skeptical and at times even hostile toward area specialists. The desire to achieve academic acceptability on a broader and deeper basis in the U. S. makes Southeast Asian specialists loathe to consider themselves simply as members of some larger group of scholars and to have their subject area subsumed under some larger spatial rubric. The academic price of intellectual separation to foster professional identity and autonomy has been a precarious position at the margins of American

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2) For example, Harootunian and Sakai [1999].

universities. While it is difficult to imagine any Southeast Asian specialist in the United States accepting intellectually the notion that Southeast Asia can be studied as part of East Asia, East Asian subjects in fact spill over into Southeast Asia repeatedly.

Consider a few examples from different periods of history. Southeast Asia's original inhabitants arrived from Austronesia, but many of those who later migrated into the region came from the Chinese mainland where those who remained became minorities outnumbered by Han Chinese. Sharing a common rice agriculture and technologies like bronze bell casting, similarities between and connections among those living in south China were in some ways greater with people in Southeast Asia than with those in north China during China's early imperial era (Qin-Han dynasties and subsequent centuries of political fragmentation) [Higham 1996]. In the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, maritime trade connected Southeast and Northeast Asian ports as well as Chinese ports in a web of commercial relations into which Europeans would arrive and occupy only minor positions; Chinese links with Southeast Asia remained strong through the eighteenth and well into the nineteenth centuries. Only in the second half of the nineteenth century did the formation of a Western-dominated international trade system reduce the salience and significance of trade links within East and Southeast Asia [Momoki and Hasuda 2007]. In the 1930s the Japanese began to develop a vision of regional empire that ultimately included Southeast Asian sites in addition to China and Korea; their imperialist vision embraced sites from Northeast to Southeast Asia as components of a larger East Asia that complemented the German ambitions of achieving a kind of regional integration of Europe under its leadership [Peattie 1988]. The 1997 financial crisis, sometimes labeled an "East Asian" financial crisis in the press, included both Thailand and Indonesia along with Korea as countries severely affected by sudden capital outflows and currency collapses; in this instance what united these countries was a common vulnerability to unstable financial flows which prompted regional responses intended to prevent subsequent repetition of such crises.<sup>3)</sup> Finally, in the opening decade of the twenty-first century discussions of an "East Asian Community" modeled on some features of European integration have been discussed and debated by academics in China, Japan and South Korea, as well as Southeast Asia where the initiative of ASEAN to involve China, Japan and South Korea in regional discussions (ASEAN+ 3) has led to some policy makers and academics affirming a vision of an East Asia that very much includes Southeast Asia [Yoshino 2006; Oya *et al.* 2006].

One period that lacks much evidence of connections and shared concerns across East Asia and Southeast Asia begins after World War II when the two areas were largely defined as separate spaces politically and academically in the United States. Conceived as regions composed of national states, those of Southeast Asia were shaped by a history of Western colonialism, while East Asia was made up of national states formed in different

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3) For example Federal Reserve Bank of San Francisco [1998].

circumstances. China's political isolation and Japan's focus upon domestic economic recovery and development in the 1950s meant that they lacked intense and significant relations to Southeast Asian countries. Not only could "East Asia" and "Southeast Asia" be conceived as separate areas in the United States, but most East Asian specialists in American universities worked exclusively or at least primarily on only one country within East Asia. So too did Southeast Asian specialists work principally on a single country but the paucity of specialists meant they were more likely to stress their academic kinship than were East Asian specialists who could form meaningful communities with others who worked on their country of specialization without reference to other countries in East Asia. These scholarly proclivities fit well with American policymakers' preferences for thinking in bilateral terms for diplomatic and economic relations rather than in regional terms. The political and academic reasons for the post-World War II formulation of separate East and Southeast Asian areas and the relative insignificance of regional units of analysis were the product of a particular historical moment when national states loomed large and the United States asserted its preeminence in the arenas of international political and economic relations in a competition with the Soviet-led bloc of Communist countries.<sup>4)</sup> East Asia mattered little as a spatial unit for analysis or action, whether or not Southeast Asia was seen as part of the region or not. National states, the importance of which became increasingly visible through the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, were fundamentally important for much of the second half of the twentieth century both as key units of study and analysis and as the collective actors between which activities beyond the nation and state were organized.

Since the collapse of the USSR and the increasingly dense and diverse connections defining contemporary conditions across the globe, we have left a world of national states joined largely through bilateral relations politically and economically. Our new conditions have prompted scholars across the humanities and social sciences to criticize studies that treat national states as the only meaningful units of observation and analysis. Some of us imagine we have escaped the straitjacket of national states as the subject of history and object of historical study because we examine small subjects in big settings, moving between our local subjects and some global context. Yet, we are never that far from nations and their states because we have not collectively filled the void between the local and global in an orderly way that makes clear the ways that nations and their states do and do not matter to understanding the world around us today and in the past. What we are missing is much needed additional attention to the geographies of

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4) Early issues of the *Bulletin of Concerned Asian Scholars* critique the government's role in formulating the area studies approach. See Gilman [2003: 190–202] for a discussion of how area studies fit within the Cold War political logic of a major architect of American policy strategy, Walt Rostow.

connections that emerge in the spaces beyond national states that are far less than global. We need to fill in the spaces between local and global in order to understand the world around us. I suggest in this essay that a reconsideration of regional spaces like “East Asia” and “Southeast Asia” can help us mediate between the local and global as we put national states in broader contexts. As we think about how regional spaces in general matter, we can also ponder if or when it can be helpful to consider “Southeast Asia” to be a part of some larger “East Asia.” This contemporary challenge also includes understanding histories that occur between the local and global scales of our human and natural worlds.

Thinking about how connected “Southeast Asia” and “East Asia” have been historically is challenging because the indicators for integration or connection can either rise or fall depending on whether the link or relationship is economic, political, social or cultural. In addition, over the *longue durée* from the early modern to modern eras there are more connections within regions (however defined) and between them in a more global context. Thus, the kinds of connections within a region could increase at the same time as those links become sensible as part of a larger spatial pattern of changes. In early history migrations of people and technologies between the southern Chinese mainland and mainland Southeast Asia may have created significant ties at a time when the region had few links to other parts of Eurasia, yet those connections were no doubt far less dense than the patterns of migration and trade that emerged in the late nineteenth century when the region was itself becoming more integrated into global networks of trade and migration. Actors external to the region can play a major role in promoting or limiting linkages within the region as American government policy makers clearly did in the Cold War era.

The different connections and shared features between “East Asia” and “Southeast Asia” earlier in this essay are usually only noticed by individuals concerned with particular problems or processes important to specific periods of history. Because we conventionally organize our histories of East and Southeast Asia separately from each other, we are unlikely to consider the ways in which the linkages might together tell us something about this part of the world that cannot be easily perceived when the areas are treated separately. Because the conventional spatial units into which we organize research and teaching about different parts of the world are national we are little inclined to scrutinize our choices about defining areas that are not formal political units. We allow these formal political units to be our standard vehicles for studying many subjects, even those that occur before the emergence of today’s national states.

### **Reframing National States in a Global Age: The Relevance of Regions**

National states have been a durable focus for enquiry because their contemporary existence is buttressed by claims about history. One of the main purposes of looking into

history has been to create national pasts as a means to promote a shared social identity in the present and point people toward a common future, often under a political regime that bolsters its legitimacy by representing the people as a nation. Museums house artifacts documenting a country's early history while its libraries and archives contain written records of its language being used for diverse purposes. Yet our awareness of documents and artifacts that bear witness to a past that informs our present says little about what assumptions the producers of these treasures had about who they were or what would follow them. Few of them likely had any inkling that their activities would some day be seen as contributions to the national heritages of societies and states that became the units in which nineteenth and twentieth-century people organized themselves and saw others. While historians understand the anachronistic quality of attributing to earlier people the sensibilities of those living in later historical periods, some study people constructing their national pasts rather than the past itself.<sup>5)</sup>

As scholars, we need to mount our own expeditions into the past in order to give accounts of how people organized their lives and how social and material worlds were transformed by their actions, sometimes deliberately, sometimes as unintended consequences, and often in ways they could not have anticipated. To do so we need spatial categories encouraging us to identify the distinctive traits of particular times and places and the activities that created processes of change transforming people and the worlds around them. The discredited categories once conventionally used to capture distinctive features of different parts of the world were "civilizations."

Exercises of differentiation among civilizations favored the selection of traits deemed essential to understanding the characteristics of one civilization compared to others. They necessarily simplified complex and diverse patterns of belief and behavior within each civilization. Because much of the written and archaeological record concerns elites, the lives of common people were also easily slighted. When scholars became skeptical of the usefulness or even plausibility of grand comparisons and when many of them became more interested in considering complexities and differences within civilizations, the category of "civilization" became less necessary and less desirable. It has not been replaced because scholars refrained during the middle decades of the twentieth century from making grand comparisons across a wide sweep of times and places.

The development in the late twentieth century of "world" and "global" history has created a new intellectual context within which to consider the possibilities of spatial units that work for the study of periods before and beyond national states. We have not taken this to be a crucial task because so many of the best studies produced under the rubric of world history and global history stress connections among widely separated places. These studies traverse large stretches of territory that take no form or shape because they are not themselves objects of study. The places at either end of these great

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5) For representative scholarship in this field see the journal *History and Memory*.



distances are the areas from which migrants come or go and they are the areas producing and consuming the ideas and objects brought by people moving between them. We learn that there were many important ways that people have been engaged with each other over very great distances long before our contemporary era of globalization.<sup>6)</sup>

A second strand in early modern global history has made us aware of dynamism in the world beyond Europe. The presence of parallel processes of commercial expansions, cultural consolidations, and state building efforts, to name a few of the major changes scholars have analyzed, has made Europe far less unique than previously assumed.<sup>7)</sup> But these arguments are only slowly changing our views of historical changes in more recent times. The parallels that scholars have found in early modern times mean that people outside of Europe (and their states, economies and societies) were capable of historical change, but none of them achieved independently of Europe either industrial capitalism or sovereign national states. Conceiving the modern era largely in terms of the spread of European ideas and institutions has left us ill equipped for understanding what accounts for the varied characteristics of regions in today's world of capitalism and national states. We know the world is now moving well beyond the formation of European national states and industrialization, but have yet adequately to take the measure of how historical processes of change in other parts of the world have contributed to producing distinctive possibilities in different parts of the world.

We need now, perhaps more than ever, to consider what the study of regions that are conceived as spaces within which historical processes similar to as well as different from those taking place in other regions mattered not only before these regions became more closely connected, but also to the modern world that we previously have seen as a distinctly European creation. The histories of other world regions affect what we see today around us, but sometimes in ways we find hard to appreciate because our expectations for what should exist globally remain strongly informed by what happened first in Europe.

### **European Perspectives on Recent Political Transformations in Asia and Europe**

Most scholars agree on two major and entwined historical processes that have formed the modern world, even if their explanations for the processes differ. For almost every observer the formation of European national states and development of European industrial capitalism are the two master processes that have carried humanity more generally from what was once called the Dark Ages after the collapse of the Roman

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6) For example, McNeill [1977] and Crosby [1987].

7) The major recent work of this genre is Lieberman [2003; 2009]

Empire to the nineteenth and twentieth-century possibilities for economic riches and political satisfactions. More specifically these processes first made modern Europe and the neo-Europes formed by white settler societies and then defined the norms according to which historical changes in the rest of the world have been judged. We use the metrics of an industrial democracy to judge the economies and political regimes of countries around the world. Even as we sense our world moving beyond national states and into a post-industrial age we are slow to change the lens through which we observe and evaluate the world. And when we do make changes, they often remain rooted in European experiences.

Consider the dynamics of political change and the ways “region” has entered into contemporary politics and social science research. We used to believe that the formation of democratic national states was the endpoint of political development, but the emergence of the European Union has led scholars and policy makers to revise what had been an unquestioned understanding of modern political thinking about basic institutional forms. From a long-run historical perspective, Europe’s new political adventures have led leaders within and beyond Europe to see the rest of the world’s political possibilities and priorities in a different light.

The initiatives of ASEAN leaders to develop ASEAN+ 3 to engage China, Japan and South Korea in more formal multi-lateral discussions has helped to create the conceptual space in which some scholars are exploring the possibilities of an “East Asian Community.” Some efforts to conceptualize an East Asian region or community proceed from the principles already used in Europe. A proposal by a group of Japanese academics for such a community appeals to the language and logic utilized in developing the European Union with an aim to creating formal means to ensure coordinated efforts to promote regional security, combat international crime, cooperate on disaster relief, and alleviate poverty. In addition the authors call for cooperation on issues of financial market regulation and energy policies [Nakamura *et al.* 2006]. More generally, the formal political discussions among the sovereign states and the informal scholarly conversations among academics both make use of political principles first forged in European diplomatic discourses. Regional political structures in both East Asia and Europe aim to reduce the costs of coordinated political decision making and raise the economic benefits available for more effective integration. Shared subjects of contention also emerge in the East Asian and European cases regarding what states should or should not be admitted into the regional groupings. It is thus not surprising that policy makers and academics both recognize the fundamental role of European political practices in enabling similar possible developments elsewhere. The reasons for such a view are understandable intellectual extensions from earlier ideas about national state formation based on European models. But moved to the regional level, some of the difficulties with using European models for political practices elsewhere become clearer than they have been when approached at the national level.

Prominent in recent debates about the formation of an East Asian “community” (*kyōdōtai*) has been the role of China in such a regional political structure. Some analysts actively oppose the formation of any kind of East Asian community based on the belief that it would be a vehicle for Chinese leaders to promote their hegemonic position across the region. Others prefer to see Australia and New Zealand added to the ASEAN+3 group for regional meetings in order to increase the weight of democratic regimes in the formation of the region. From beyond the region, however defined, some observers view a United States opposing any regional grouping that compromises its ability to negotiate bilateral arrangements with individual states and more generally its capacities to influence international politics in the region. Amidst the different perspectives and priorities of actors within and beyond East and Southeast Asia it is clear that a turn to ASEAN+3 after 2000 took place as APEC was increasingly viewed as ineffective and inappropriate for what many leaders in East and Southeast Asia thought desirable politically and economically [Stubbs 2002; Yu 2003].

The kinds of actors and their issues regarding the development of more formal political structures across East Asia are quite different from those in Europe. It is no wonder that few if any analysts can imagine an East Asian Community closely resembling the European Union to be likely soon, if ever. Moreover, there is no consensus on what the desirable goals should be regarding political relations and organizations involving sovereign states in the region. The political viability of an East Asian Community rests in part on the ability and desire of the major powers in the region, Chinese and Japanese stakeholders, to find that the advantages of collective coordination outweigh those of competition and possible conflict. They could decide that the costs of formal coordination are too high and that their interests are better served by more informal efforts to keep relations on a stable footing. Moreover, despite the EU’s far greater formal structure, its effectiveness at addressing some pressing issues has not always been up to the standards achieved across ASEAN+3—monetary policy responses to the financial crisis of autumn 2008 being an obvious example of far greater coordination in East Asia than in Europe.

An example here or there of East Asian regional cooperation appearing more effective than what occurs in the EU notwithstanding, the temptation to assume the EU supplies norms and models for others to consider if not emulate, is strong. Yet, the European Union is not a practical model. Its salience is an extension of earlier assumptions about European national state formation providing norms and models for state making elsewhere and due to the absence of any other easily available models. It remains easy to assume that European political practices represent more advanced possibilities that others should consider. The EU remains an ideal against which East Asia, however constructed, can never measure up.

Policy makers and academics are well aware that the EU and East Asian regional groups are different but the search for ways in which the example of the EU can motivate

scholars and practitioners in East Asia remains strong as Giovanni Capannelli of the Asian Development Bank expressed clearly in 2009:

The EU is often presented as the integration model for other regional groupings, in Asia and elsewhere. But while regions can learn from others' experiences, their needs and circumstances vary. Asia must find its own path to greater cooperation and integration. This requires visionaries, people with great ideas who—as Jean Monnet, Robert Schumann, and Altiero Spinelli did in Europe—can influence opinion makers, inspire national leaders, and eventually enable the region to speak with a more prominent common voice in global forums. [Capannelli 2009]

His counsel was perhaps a bit ironic since ASEAN's historical roots and major purposes until quite recently have been to give Southeast Asian governments a platform from which to speak with the powerful countries outside the immediate area [Pollard 1970]. The EU's formation was driven far more by awareness of advantages to be gained economically and politically within the region rather than for the region as a whole with those beyond its borders. More recently, concern for how effectively ASEAN is organized as a region has been raised with a desire for groups within civil society to gain a greater voice in a regional context [Focus on the Global South 2006]. Others have made clear that regional integration is complicated by the competing interests of different actors on any given issue, such as the development of a gas pipeline by ASEAN [Carroll and Sovacool 2008]. What emerges from varied assessments of politics and economics in East and Southeast Asia is that there are ways in which relations within the region are often distinct from more general global relations. Regionalism can even define a path toward globalization economically as an Asian Development Bank report concluded in 2003 — Southeast Asian economies can pursue globalism through greater regional integration with China [Roland-Holst, Azis and Liu 2003].

In order to gain additional perspectives on regional political formations in the contemporary world and in particular on the ways in which a region composed of ASEAN+3 is an East Asia different from the Europe defined by the EU if we can consider the EU as the outcome of particular historical processes quite unlike those found in East Asia. To appreciate some of these differences, a historical contrast of Chinese and European political transformations is offered below.

### **Global Processes or Regional Processes: European State Making and Beyond**

To think in new ways about how we can evaluate East Asia's future political possibilities I wish to propose another way to look at the relationship between states and regions. We begin in the distant past. If we go back 2000 years to the time of the Han and Roman

empires we discover political regimes that in their territory and population were very similar. Both the Han and Roman empires achieved the same geographical scale of 2.2 (Roman empire) to 2.3 (Han empire) million square miles. The Han empire's population reached some 59.6 million people and the Roman empire's population about 60 million; together they accounted for over half of the world's total population. Both regimes also owe their collapses to a combination of internal difficulties and challenges from military foes sharing common historical roots on the steppes. But where Europe enters what was once dramatically called the "Dark Ages" characterized by simple subsistence economies and small states, empire re-emerged on the Chinese mainland. The differences are not principally the result of different aspirations of political leaders. The strongest successors to both the Han and Roman empires wished to achieve control over the peoples and lands once ruled by their imperial predecessors. But the political ideas and bureaucratic institutions fostering the recreation and consolidation of empire developed through the first millennium of Chinese imperial history so that the logic of agrarian empire was consolidated and viable from the Mongol reunification of China in the thirteenth century to the collapse of the Manchu's empire in the early twentieth century without interruption.<sup>8)</sup> During this same stretch of centuries, European political leaders managed to reduce the number of small independent political regimes through a process of national state formation, the very process that created the template for institutional features we have for states world-wide today [Tilly 1992]. But large European states (still far less than the spatial scale of Chinese empires), were rare: Charlemagne held together a large state for one generation in the era of the Tang empire, while Napoleon and Hitler in very different ways briefly held authority over territories spanning several European states. But from a Chinese political perspective, Europeans, after the fall of the Roman empire, always lived in a politically fragmented region with states that for the most part had very limited capacities to govern their subject populations. Only in the late twentieth-century formation of the European Union have leaders begun to fashion a center of authority over a territory and population reaching toward the scale that Chinese political leaders have enjoyed for centuries. This sort of comparison is rarely made. The thought of evaluating European political transformations according to a standard derived from Chinese history is awkward if not absurd. We have little difficulty explaining that the European Union should not be seen as a weaker and more limited version of the Chinese state; we cannot imagine Chinese political ideas and institutions providing a useful set of standards for assessing what the EU may or may not become. Yet the implications of our inability to use Chinese experiences as a useful baseline for observing European political changes for the symmetrically limited utility of using European metric for evaluating the Chinese state is almost never drawn out. Recognizing the limits of European state

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8) This contrasting set of historical experiences is discussed more fully in chapter 1 of Rosenthal and Wong [2011].

transformations to explain the nature of the Chinese state gives us a different perspective from which to view the inabilities of EU formation to guide our understanding of regional political possibilities in East Asia.

Contrasting China and the EU suggests how the EU is a weak state from a Chinese perspective, a comparison that complements the more obvious comparison of regional political ties in East Asia being weak compared to those in the EU. Together the two comparisons suggest that we more carefully consider what the similarities and differences in comparisons tell us about what to expect in the two cases. The ways in which the EU is seeking to create a level of spatial authority similar to that achieved earlier and by a different path in China includes facing similar challenges of defining relations between center and lower levels of authority, of defining the range of variations in policies and the core of common principles, and finding ways to balance administrative effectiveness and political voice for citizens. Structural challenges are similar despite the menu of ideological and institutional choices available in China and Europe being very different. Europeans are seeking to build on the foundations of sovereign states with equal diplomatic status and offer a new governmental center able to administer key issues in standard and uniform ways across all of these states. Looking at what makes China and the EU comparable also informs what limits the comparison of East Asia with the EU.

At the same time as Europeans are searching for ways to create vertical political structures over diplomatically equal sovereign states, some people in East Asia are trying to use the principles of Westphalia to increase relations among states that have no common tradition of diplomacy and for whom the most salient ideal principles of past inter-state relations were the hierarchical notions promoted by the Chinese empire. Such language is unappealing to Chinese and everyone else today. The lack of usable historical precedents within East Asia makes the appeal to European conventions understandable for ordering relations in East Asia. Of course the ideals of the political equality of sovereign states formulated in the Treaty of Westphalia in 1648 were intended to improve relations among competitive regimes that together ruled less territory and far fewer people than were to be found in the same period in Qing China, let alone in China and her neighbors together. What was true in 1648 remains true today—European states are smaller and more similar to each other culturally, economically and politically than are China and its neighbors. These greater similarities exist despite Europeans crafting separate social identities based on different national pasts. EU leaders and member states are hardly equal to each other in their economic and political power even as they enjoy similar rights within the organization. The leaders among them have to reach a common understanding on issues for the group more generally to succeed. This regional political logic is more difficult if not impossible in East Asia because of China's great size. One might imagine that this means China doesn't need coalition building but to the contrary its large size makes it harder for the country to take a diplomatic lead in developing a larger regional community. Such a move came after 1997 from Southeast Asia, what had

been in an earlier era a periphery of China. A very different political and economic situation than existed centuries earlier has fostered the creation of a very different kind of East Asian region in both political and economic terms today.

Political and economic change in today's world as well as the dynamics that produced very different kinds of states and economic change in the past have regional features. Europe's modern state formation experience is perhaps best understood as a regional phenomenon that has had significance for other parts of the world without being the simple and sole model that it implicitly is assumed to be in most research. If we are to learn how better to anticipate and guide political change outside Europe, we might be well served by learning better how to explain political change in the past in other world regions, like East Asia. This essay suggests some elements of a strategy that recognizes the spatial similarities between the Chinese empire and European states, a similarity between the imperial Chinese empire and early modern European states which help us see how different any East Asian region will likely be from Europe as a region.

There is no one way to compare political changes in Europe with those in East Asia. Recognizing the usefulness of contrasting a European region with the single country of China especially makes sense as Europe adopts more formal political characteristics. Over this same period of Europe-wide political integration we see that Southeast Asia has had more and more political and economic ties with China and Japan. While these do not promise to lead to a community like the European Union, the European Union, for its part, will never become very similar to the People's Republic of China. Together these observations suggest a more open approach to multiple comparisons that together can sharpen our awareness of both similarities and differences between the kinds of states and political relations they have within and across different world regions.

Regions need not have any fixed and formal status like that of sovereign states in order to be useful units for scholarly analysis. They can change over time with the emergence and decline of particular political and economic ties or social and cultural connections among people. Understanding how regions can expand and contract and when they are especially important and relatively insignificant frames of reference for political activities will likely be enhanced by viewing them in historical perspective. Guided by this approach, what we conventionally call Southeast Asia has only sometimes had close and important relations with what we call East Asia, but we make understanding the nature of those relations difficult to evaluate because we take their separation as the norm and evaluate their possible relations according to practices first initiated in Europe. We need not be intellectual prisoners of this particular geopolitical vision of the world.

In conclusion, perhaps we can offer a response to the query posed in this essay's subtitle—"Is Southeast Asia (ever) part of East Asia?" Yes, the area referred to in the post-World War II American definition of Southeast Asia is indeed sometimes part of a larger region we can call East Asia. We need geographical labels which can identify parts

of the world in which human activity takes place between the local and the global and across national political borders, but we need not continue to accept those we have inherited. An East Asia that includes China, Northeast Asia and Southeast Asia may be a more useful first approximation than the still conventional East Asia and Southeast Asia that shape not only our textbooks and our teaching but also the ways we approach much of our research.

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